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Should We Educate the Spirit In Our Public Schools?

A radio discussion over WGN and the Mutual Broadcasting System

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Should We Educate the Spirit In Our Public Schools?

MR. MCBURNEY: We are glad to present this discussion of ethical and moral education in the public schools in recognition of National Brotherhood Week. Few people will deny that the home, the church, and the school have a responsibility to help young people develop an adequate code of personal and social values. Today we ask how the public schools should share in this responsibility.

MR. HUNT: The public schools share in the responsibility for helping young people develop an adequate code of personal and social values in many ways. Let me suggest but a few: By educating for higher ideals and efforts in daily living; by satisfying the basic needs for recognition, security, and responsibility through the development of such qualities as appreciation, cooperation, loyalty, generosity, and kindness; by strengthening democratic practices through understanding and effecting moral and spiritual principles; by providing continuous emphasis in the entire school program on the growth of human understanding and moral values; by recognizing that these values are not a separate and distinct aspect of the curriculum but are a part of the total school program.

Moral Security

MR. MCBURNEY: Do you go along with that, Mr. Shane?

MR. SHANE: Yes, and I particularly would like to express the importance of what we might call "moral security," helping children, through the work of the school, to develop a sense of what is right and good so they might be as they grow older more successful than many of us have been in making a world that makes sense. I

would like to footnote the importance of human brotherhood not so much as a vague goal any longer but a real necessity in this age of applied science and a world capable of its own destruction.

MR. VAN TIL: Mr. Shane has stated it well. The children of people of all races and nationalities and religions attend the American public school. What a magnificent chance the school has to teach them the ways of democracy! For democracy is the great American idea, the great commitment of this nation. Children in our schools can learn democracy by living it, by planning, by working with others, by thinking things through, by sharing and by respecting others. As they do that, they come to understand that democracy is more than just a matter of government. They know democracy is a philosophy, a way of living.

MR. MCBURNEY: Mr. Van Til has been talking about education for democracy. What do you mean by "educating the spirit," Dr. Hunt?

MR. HUNT: Since we recognize that an individual functions as a whole, we cannot think of educating the spirit apart from the whole child. In adequately educating the whole child, then we are most likely to provide for his spiritual needs, in my opinion.

Ideals and Standards

MR. VAN TIL: When we talk of educating the spirit, aren't we talking about evolving ideals and standards which will direct the lives of young people?

MR. SHANE: I would also like to point out that in our culture ethical and moral values almost universally are based upon values stemming from religious belief.

MR. MCBURNEY: I think we ought to spell out fairly specifically here at the beginning of this discussion, Dr. Hunt, the objectives that we have in view in developing the spirit of the child in the public school. What are these objectives, as you see them?

MR. HUNT: That is a big assignment, but let me try to be as specific as I can. I would think in terms of objectives such as these: To develop a knowledge of the major religious movements in world history; to develop an understanding of the broad, basic concepts of spiritual truths underlying all religious thinking; to develop an understanding of the need for adopting those spiritual, ethical, and moral qualities which lead to the good life; to develop an appreciation for the contributions people of all religious, racial, and ethnic groups have made to our culture; to develop values of human understanding characterized by faith and good will toward mankind; to develop critical and objective thinking in determining those qualities which contribute to the greatest personal and social good; and to develop an appreciation for the great music, art, and literature in our society. These are some of the things that occur to me.

'Four Ways'

MR. VAN TIL: I would mention four of those as being especially central in the business of educating the spirit, educating for ethical and moral values. First of all, it seems to me that the job of the school today is to help individuals learn to respect the worth and dignity of other individual personalities. A second big job is to help young people learn how to work together, not for coerced purposes but for purposes which they believe to be important and which they accept. The third job, to me, is helping young people develop their intelligence so they can consider alternatives and think out problems and work their way through these confused issues that Shane mentioned. And the fourth big job of the American public school

is fostering the common welfare in this country.

MR. SHANE: I think we should also dig in and think a bit what that means. I think our generalizations in the school must be supplemented by helping children acquire an accurate knowledge of the changing world and its people, and a compulsive will to understand as they reach out toward others in a spirit of friendliness, in building a more humane civilization than we have had.

MR. VAN TIL: I agree with that very much, because I believe you are saying that to carry out these objectives a school can't simply preach them to youngsters. A school must be an environment where one lives these objectives and where the concept is related to the needs and problems of these youngsters and the big social realities of our times that we have to cope with or perish.

MR. MCBURNEY: That raises the question, of course, how best to achieve the objectives you gentlemen are talking about. Do you think that religious education in the public schools is the best approach to these problems, to these objectives, Mr. Shane? I am talking about "religious education" in a rather formal sense.

Denominational Instruction?

MR. SHANE: To answer that in one word I would say "No" in the sense of religious instruction on any denominational basis. Maybe it would be worthwhile to look at some of the approaches commonly used, such as released time.

MR. MCBURNEY: What do you mean by released time?

MR. SHANE: Released time is generally interpreted to mean the release of children during a given period of time in a school week so they may receive religious instruction. As a former state supervisor, I have felt that it often is less than successful, particularly for the following reasons: I think it is difficult for the clergy, particularly in a small community to agree as to how it shall be done. I

think it is difficult to handle it, that is, to staff it and see that it is a worthwhile experience. Finally, I think it leads in some areas at least to problems in meeting the denominational preferences of parents.

MR. MCBURNEY: In other words, these students are released for specific periods of time to the clergy of their own choice for instruction. Is that the principle, Hunt, of released time?

MR. HUNT: We have such a program in the Chicago public schools where children, upon the written permission, the written understanding of their parents, are released one afternoon a week, the last hour of the school day.

MR. MCBURNEY: How does that work out?

MR. HUNT: Here it has been in effect for many, many years and apparently very satisfactorily.

MR. VAN TIL: I find myself sharing some of Mr. Shane's doubts concerning released time, particularly if we prize the importance of freedom of religion as a basic principle in American life. We have had episodes and illustrations of coercion in terms of young people feeling obligated to join the released time groups of one or another particular church, finding themselves somewhat embarrassed if they were with that group of people who were "non-church." And I am not quite sure whether the total approach of incorporating sectarian religion within the school will not backfire in a sense upon our desire to have all young people of all backgrounds and races and nationalities and creeds come together and learn the American way, rather than be separated and segregated.

Special Teacher?

MR. MCBURNEY: You think it would be better, Van Til, to bring in a special teacher of religion, a sort of religious educator?

MR. VAN TIL: You've got problems there, of course, when you bring in a special religious educator. There is the question of which of the 260 sects in American religion the religious edu-

cator should represent; and if not a sect, the question of whether or not good and vigorous churches will not regard the religion taught in the school as a watered-down religion.

MR. SHANE: There is another point which I think is important: It is often difficult to find qualified personnel who are also available. So often when you try to find instructors who come in occasionally, perhaps once or twice a week, to teach religious education, they are qualified largely by their own interests, goodwill, and pretensions as teachers.

MR. HUNT: Let me suggest that it should be the job of every member of the staff, working in a cooperative pattern with the administration and with the community, with the character building agencies of the community, rather than to set someone apart and assign to him these peculiar tasks.

MR. VAN TIL: I agree with that thoroughly. I think religion is an integral part of our life and must be studied and dealt with in the American schools just exactly as economic problems are dealt with, or social problems. It is wound right into our history. It is part of our literary tradition. Our good teachers do and must deal with religion.

'Teacher Responsibility'

MR. HUNT: Let me point out that here in Illinois each one of us as a teacher is charged with the responsibility of teaching pupils honesty, kindness, justice and moral courage, for the purpose of lessening crime and raising the standards of good citizenship. That is the way the law reads and we individually, as well as collectively, have to assume that responsibility.

MR. SHANE: I think we are in agreement, that we are not speaking of religious instruction in any sectarian sense whatsoever, so we avoid the denominational bias of the teacher who has been brought up in a particular faith.

MR. VAN TIL: For instance, we are

thinking of religious education as related to intercultural education, building better relationships among people who are different in terms of races, nationalities and backgrounds. There we have a task in the American school of getting young people acquainted with other religions and other ways of worship and the religious holidays and festivals of other groups.

MR. MCBURNEY: But is the kind of education you men are talking about religious education at all? Are you really teaching religion when you teach the kind of program you are discussing, Van Til?

MR. VAN TIL: I am not sure. I think we are teaching ethical, spiritual and moral values. Religion is a word which is so variously defined that perhaps you need a philosopher for that.

MR. SHANE: We are talking less, I think, of teaching a religion than teaching religion, recognizing that religious values and religious viewpoints are a part of Western culture. They are in the writings of Dante and Milton. Our literature is permeated with "religion." We can't escape it. But we can, of course, and should get away from teaching anything like a religion.

American Tradition

MR. VAN TIL: When Shane comments along that line he is right in line with the American tradition concerning religion. This country has stressed freedom of religion and worshipping God as one sees fit, and it has regarded religion as a tremendously private affair. Jefferson and other statesmen have set up walls of separation between church and state. That is what Shane is hitting at when he talks about avoiding sectarianism in American education.

MR. SHANE: That is right.

MR. HUNT: Specifically, I would like to point out that many schools are constructively building in the direction of greater moral and spiritual values in education. Let me cite one instance.

Here in our great Chicago public school system we have working with our Chicago Curriculum Council, a committee charged with this whole problem of the spiritual and aesthetic needs of the child. It is still in the tentative stage, but the work of the committee is concerned with building of good school morale, stressing such qualities as friendliness, courtesy, hospitality, consideration and fair play. This group has considered religion in many ways, some of which have already been mentioned, reviewing the influence of religious movements on history, utilizing these specific occasions, such as Brotherhood Week and patriotic holidays, developing an appreciation for the religious masterpieces of all the arts, painting, architecture, sculpture, music, literature, drama. There is so much that can be done and is being done!

MR. MCBURNEY: What you men are saying here in substance, I think, is this: that you can teach these ethical and spiritual values in the public schools without getting involved in formal religious education or sectarian religious education as such. Is that a fair summary of what you have been saying?

'Two Kinds of Schools'

MR. VAN TIL: It is a fair summary of what we have been saying, with this important modification. We must recognize in general terms that there are two kinds of schools. There is the school that stresses facts and memorization and meaningless learning so much that it leaves out completely the warm, humane, spiritual values that this group is trying to move toward and advocate.

On the other hand, there is the kind of school which prizes the needs of young people and deals with the social realities of our times. This kind of school repeatedly gives young people a chance to learn to live these good, humane, democratic values which have come down to us from the Jewish and Christian tradition—values that are so important in the lives of young people.

MR. MCBURNEY: Which raises the precise question I had in mind. What is your evaluation, Hunt, of the present attempts in the public schools to educate the spirit as we are discussing it? Is this job being done?

MR. HUNT: I think so. I would point specifically to the pioneering work being done in the Detroit public schools. Los Angeles has made a distinct contribution. Philadelphia is doing a good piece of work. I suspect Van Til can tell us more about it in detail.

MR. MCBURNEY: What is being done in Detroit? That was one city you named.

'Study Human Relationships'

MR. SHANE: Detroit, as a result of racial eruption during the war, has developed what is sometimes called the "Detroit Citizenship Study." It is now, I believe, approaching its fifth year. After the racial difficulties which obtained there during the war, a number of persons got together to try to see that it never happened again. As a result of their deliberations, Wayne University, which is an integral part of the Detroit public schools, and the public schools, lay citizens and various welfare groups, launched this particular study. They have tried to set up centers in various parts of Detroit, so that they may experiment in ways of developing better human relationships, thus making the quality of human relationships one of the approaches to the education of the spirit.

MR. VAN TIL: There is another contribution that Detroit made and that is in the area of intercultural education. Again, following upon the race riots, Detroit, greatly stirred, moved further in its attempt to build racial and religious and nationality understanding in the schools. They did it primarily through intercultural committees which were set up in school after school, and each committee then attempted to do its very best to work out techniques which would be useful for a particular school in building better understanding among people who, by definition, were different in

race, creed, color, or whatever it might be.

MR. HUNT: This specific discussion would not be complete, I am sure, without reference to the contribution of the Springfield, Massachusetts, public schools, early pioneers in this field, out of which grew what is commonly referred to as "The Springfield Plan," a plan which has as its purpose living together, democratically in our social scheme.

Study Religious Traditions

MR. VAN TIL: A few specifics on that Springfield, Massachusetts, approach might be useful at this time. For instance, in some classes they study world religions, and learn about the contributions of East and West to religious traditions. I know of other classes where they have visited churches of various denominations. There has been a highly successful Christmas festival in which Christian observances were coupled with the Jewish observances of a holiday which fell near that same time. And, finally, I would mention a survey of the people who made up the community, where one group of youngsters was engaged in tracing the historical backgrounds of their ancestors.

MR. SHANE: Hunt mentioned the Philadelphia "openmindedness" study. I think that deserves to be mentioned in the same breath with the others. There the approach is one taken more directly with the classroom teacher. For several years, Cushman and Goldstein and others have been trying to help teachers sensitize themselves as to ways in which classroom experiences of children can be put to work in building better human relationships.

MR. VAN TIL: Philadelphia is the locale of another interesting study in one of my areas of interest, intercultural relationships. It was an attempt to discover whether or not very young people had some of the prejudices which unfortunately infest our society to a greater or larger degree. And it was found to the surprise of some scholars that the young people,

even in the 6 year old range, 7 year old range, 8 year old range, do have certain impressions of other people which were unfavorable, which they have learned from their community, their parents and from the surrounding culture.

Experiments Typical?

MR. MCBURNEY: Do you suggest that these experiments in Detroit, Philadelphia and Springfield are typical, Dr. Hunt?

MR. HUNT: They are an indication of the good work that is being done. I think we will all agree that there remains much to be done. There always will be, but it is encouraging to be able to point to some of these outstanding public school systems of our country and from them get an idea of what can be done.

MR. VAN TIL: Perhaps they are typical of the frontier in American education.

MR. SHANE: I think it is significant that they are taking place in a number of instances in large cities which have always been thought of as so cursed with bigness that they don't move at all.

MR. MCBURNEY: Earlier in the discussion you referred to the schools which are committed pretty much to the traditional curriculum, to the three Rs, suggesting, I think, that that type of school was doing less in this area of spiritual and moral education. Is that more nearly the typical pattern in American public education?

MR. VAN TIL: Well, at the risk of being called a pessimist by my colleagues around the table here, I am afraid it is more nearly the typical pattern in American education. We need a great deal of help from the public on this matter. Unfortunately, sometimes, the school system which attempts to move beyond a program which includes and stresses the three Rs (and I would say that the teaching of those three Rs is very meaningful) occasionally comes under community fire or community pressure because it

deviates from the little red school house conception of education.

MR. SHANE: One of the most pathetic aspects of the thing you brought up, Van Til, is the fact that most of us parents, community members who are not parents, teachers, professional educators, the lot of us, can agree on certain goals which most of us would accept, but then we get bogged down in scrapping about the ways in which we can approach these goals effectively.

MR. MCBURNEY: On what basis does the public take exception to the kind of program you are discussing?

MR. VAN TIL: Well, they take exception sometimes on the grounds that a program, which deals with the needs of young people and deals with our social problems and tries to develop spiritual and moral values must thereby neglect or teach less effectively the three Rs or the so-called basic skills.

Education's Business

MR. MCBURNEY: Aren't there some people too who feel that the school is in danger of moving into an area that is none of its business?

MR. HUNT: That may be, but I think the answer to this thing we are talking about this morning stems from a return to the original concept that made public education in the United States not only possible but necessary. I don't see how we can go on with this discussion here of Brotherhood Week, and a week that includes the observation of the anniversary of the birth of our first President, without thinking of that conception. It is earlier than that of our federal constitution. I draw on those immortal words now: "Religion, morality and knowledge being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged." I like that combination—religion, morality and knowledge. That is fundamental to our whole discussion.

MR. VAN TIL: What Hunt is stressing here is an answer to your question—what is the business of education?

The business of education, as many of us see it, is really to help boys and girls with their actual and pressing problems, to acquaint them with the world in which they live and to help them to become the kind of democratic, humane citizens we need so desperately in this world in which we live.

'Danger of Indoctrination'

MR. MCBURNEY: I should like to raise a question which may suggest the fears of some people in the area we are discussing. Can you, Shane, teach these ethical and spiritual values without social and political indoctrination of one kind or another?

MR. SHANE: I would say "No." Teachers, without meaning to, do so. They pass along their ideas regarding social and political views, but they cannot avoid it if they are going to have a meaningful program.

MR. VAN TIL: Maybe Shane and I differ a little bit on the meaning of social and political indoctrination. To me, indoctrination always has the flavor of a conscious imposition of a controversial question which is completely unresolved upon the immature child. Now, if what Shane is saying is that he believes in certain ethical and spiritual values of democracy, such as the objectives which we mentioned earlier, as human brotherhood, working together, then I agree with that, and if that be indoctrination I take my stand on that side.

MR. SHANE: What I am trying to say is this: If a teacher helps children evaluate what is good in terms of problems facing them, she is sharing with them some of the things in which she believes. In that sense I am using the word "indoctrination" to mean "non-neutral."

MR. VAN TIL: In that sense indoctrination is inescapable. But when you come to the vexing social and political problems of our times, there the approach, as I see it for the teacher, is to present varied viewpoints on these controversial problems, whether

they be economic or religious, in an attempt to get the best values in order to arrive at a solution.

MR. HUNT: I am not at all sure that we are in disagreement here this morning. I believe we would agree, would we not, that the responsibility of the school not only is to pass on the social and cultural heritage, but in the light of our experiences to attempt to improve that social and cultural pattern.

MR. SHANE: May I bring this up in our remaining seconds. There is the question of whether some of the goals which many persons interpret as moral, ethical,—the development of brotherhood of man, individual self-realization, and elements of that kind—whether these goods actually push us toward a favorable attitude regarding socialized medicine, increased social security, socialization of major basic industries and other welfare proposals. Is it possible that these items are tied in with the work of the school?

'Socialistic Schemes'

MR. MCBURNEY: How about that, Van Til? In other words, is the teaching of these values in the ways you suggest, likely to commit us to socialistic schemes of the sort that Shane just mentioned?

MR. VAN TIL: I am inclined to think they may or may not. I am inclined to stay by a line which I would like to draw between the basic values that we are trying to teach, working together and respect for individual personalities, and what may be the result in terms of social and political institutions . . .

MR. MCBURNEY: I am sorry to interrupt, Van Til. In conclusion, may I say again that we are glad to recognize National Brotherhood Week with this discussion of the role of the public schools in developing ethical and spiritual values—values which will help all Americans live together in mutual respect and understanding.

Suggested Readings



Compiled by Barbara Wynn, Assistant,
Reference Department, Deering
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BELL, BERNARD I. *The Crisis in Education*. New York, McGraw-Hill, 1949.
Over-all survey by an outstanding religious leader.

BODE, BOYD H. (and others) *Modern Education and Human Values*. University of Pittsburgh, 1947.

Six lectures on contemporary education, including, "Religion and Education," by H. P. Van Dusen.

Christian Century 66:176, F. 9, '49. "Concerning Moral Education." B. I. BELL.

Points out that the schools today cannot teach morality, since American civilization has not agreed upon ethical standards.

Christian Century 66:707-9, 734-7, 760-3, Je. 8-Je. 22, '49. "What Did the Supreme Court Say?" CHARLES C. MORRISON.

Three articles which analyze and interpret the decision in the McCullom case concerning released time.

Commonweal 44:36-40, 68-70, 90-2, Ap. 26-May. 10, '46. "Education for the Good Life." J. MARITAIN.

Maintains that modern education's generous effort toward a better preparation for real life in the social community has been seriously endangered by today's pragmatist philosophy. "Natural morality, natural law," and great ethical ideas should be embodied in the teaching of the humanities and the liberal arts.

Education 69:648-52, Je., '49. "Education of the Spirit." J. A. LESTER.

Points out that since democracy is the political expression of humanitarianism, the teaching of democracy is full of opportunities for the education of the spirit.

Education 68:217-21, D., '47. "Hard Work for Character." J. HOLDEN.

Emphasizes the importance of the social studies in the building of character.

Educational Administration and Supervision 35:217-20, Ap., '49. "Character Education in American Schools." C. A. WEBER.

Supports what the schools are doing in the way of character education, and maintains that the released time plan is more likely to destroy than to build character.

National Education Association Journal 38:664-5, D., '49. "Making Moral and Spiritual Values Meaningful." J. M. TYDINGS.

Records the work of the Kentucky Committee on Moral and Spiritual Education appointed to study the problems of moral instruction in the public schools of Kentucky.

National Education Association Journal 38:610-11, N., '49. "Status of Religious Education in the Public Schools." N.E.A. Research Division.

The results of a questionnaire submitted to public school superintendents in urban communities, to determine how many, and what kinds of religious programs are being offered in America's schools.

Religious Education 42:234-42, Jl., '47. "Character Education of the Adolescent." H. S. DIMOCK.

Noting the social factors affecting character development of the adolescent, describes the objectives of character education, and gives suggestions for an effective program.

School and Society 65:217-20, Mr. 29, '47. "Education and the Crisis in Character." H. G. SPALDING.

Maintains that the failure in character education is due to a failure to distinguish between religion and ethics. We cannot teach religion, we should teach ethics.

School and Society 67:229-32, Mr. 27, '48. "Religion and Spiritual Values in Public Education." R. H. BECK.

Denying that the schools are "morally irresponsible, nihilistic or pagan" maintains that education has been coping with the problem of spiritual values for many years.

School and Society 67:44-6, Ja. 17, '48. "Religious Education and the Public School." B. H. JARMON.

Holds that the church should retain the sole responsibility for the religious famine of children.

School and Society 69:105-9, F. 12, '49. "Tripos in Education." C. A. RUCKMICK.

Declares that teaching and learning must rest on a tripod of mind, matter and spirit, and that teachers must orient pupils away from self-development and self-expression for their own sake, and toward service to humanity.

School and Society 69:45-6, Ja. 15, '49. "Universal Ethic and the Teaching of Moral Character." A. S. EDWARDS.

Summarizes the results of an objective study of the various ethics of many peoples, and suggests ways of teaching moral principles.

Survey Graphic 36:637-40, N., '47. "Enduring Goal." E. C. LINDEMAN.

Points out that with the failure of materialism, we are again being driven to acknowledge the truth that moral striving is the enduring goal of life, and that, consequently, morality must be the enduring goal of education. Tells how public schools may become training grounds for moral teaching.

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